

TESTIMONY OF

Sheila W. Allen, DVM, MS, Diplomate ACVS
Dean
College of Veterinary Medicine
University of Georgia

Concerning the
Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act of 2007
(H.R. 1232)

Before the
Subcommittee on Health of the United States
House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce

January 23, 2008

Good morning Congressman Pallone, Ranking Member Deal, and members of the subcommittee. I am Dr. Sheila Allen, dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Georgia. It has been my privilege to be involved in training future veterinarians at the University of Georgia for 27 years. I thank you and the subcommittee for the opportunity to speak to you today about the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act. This legislation is vital not only to the future of the veterinary profession, but to the health of our nation. My colleagues Drs. DeHaven and Pappaioanou have outlined the many critical roles that veterinarians play in protecting people from diseases transmissible from animals to man, whether that transmission occurs by direct contact (such as highly pathogenic avian influenza), from ingestion of contaminated food or water (such as *E coli* 0157 or salmonella), or through insect borne means (such as West Nile virus). They and Dr. Kelly also have described the workforce shortage that already exists in the federal agencies devoted to this important work. My testimony will focus on why the federal government should assume some of the responsibility for expanding the capacity of US Colleges of Veterinary Medicine to help address this critical shortage.

There are currently 28 Colleges of Veterinary Medicine in the United States, supported by 26 states. The states that do not have a College of Veterinary Medicine have contracts with existing colleges to provide a veterinary education for their citizens. Many of these states have conducted feasibility studies to determine what it would take to establish a College of Veterinary Medicine, and all have concluded that it is cost prohibitive. It is much more cost effective to expand existing colleges to meet the demand for enrollment and the market for veterinary graduates than to build new schools. Many of the states that do not have a College of Veterinary Medicine, yet have a high demand for enrollment among its citizens, have chosen to partner with

an existing College in another state to provide funds to allow those Colleges to expand.

Examples of such partnerships include Nebraska's partnership with Iowa State University, and the relationship between South Carolina and the University of Georgia.

The demand for enrollment in Colleges of Veterinary Medicine in the US remains high. The interest among our students in entering careers in public health, biomedical research, and food animal medicine is strong. Young people pay attention to the news and recognize the threat to human health that is posed by the prevalence of animal pathogens, and would like to be part of the veterinary workforce that will meet this challenge. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine are trying to address the shortage by admitting students with these interests, nurturing that interest while in veterinary school, and providing incentives such as scholarships and loan forgiveness programs. Students who pursue a masters of public health or doctoral research degree programs are awarded stipends to minimize the added cost of obtaining such training. As a result of these and other incentives, veterinary graduates are entering these careers in which a shortage exists. At the University of Georgia, more students entered public health, food animal practice, and biomedical research careers from last year's graduating class than ever before. Although we are pleased with this progress, the harsh reality is that it will not come close to filling the need. In order to preserve the health of our nation and its animal resources, we must have an overall expansion of enrollment in our veterinary colleges.

Some of the most severe shortages in veterinary workforce are in those fields devoted to protecting public health: food safety and food animal practice, public health officials, and biomedical research. The federal government has recognized its responsibility to protect the health of the nation by establishing the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, which is a network of diagnostic laboratories dedicated to the disease surveillance of animal populations.

The proposed National Bio and Agroterrorism Defense Facility (NBAF) is another example of our federal government assuming the responsibility of protecting our nation's animal resources.

Ladies and gentlemen, unless we work together to expand the capacity for training more veterinarians, there won't be enough qualified veterinary professionals to work in these federally funded facilities.

The states that have Colleges of Veterinary Medicine have invested heavily to educate veterinarians who will serve society, and will continue to do so. The average annual operating budget for a veterinary college is \$56 million. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine estimate the annual cost of educating a veterinary student to be \$55,000 to \$65,000 per year per student. With the average yearly tuition paid by the in-state student being \$15,000, and the out of state tuition average being \$29,000, the balance is paid by the states supporting these institutions, at an average state appropriation of \$20 million per year.

The average annual cost assumed by each student to attend veterinary school, including tuition, books, and living expenses is \$37,000 for in-state residents, and \$53,000 for out of state residents. It is no wonder that the average educational indebtedness after completing the four-year program is over \$100,000. We cannot rely exclusively on tuition increases to pay the escalating costs of operating a veterinary college, much less expanding them. To do so would exacerbate the students' debt burden, further diminishing the number of graduates who can afford to enter underserved careers in public service, biomedical research, and rural practice for which the financial compensation is less than in suburban private practice and specialized veterinary medicine.

State governments will continue to assume the ongoing costs of paying faculty and staff, facility maintenance and utilities, and all the other recurring expenses involved in running a

veterinary college, all of which are escalating rapidly. We also will continue to award scholarships and administer loan forgiveness programs for students who pursue careers of great need in our profession. We will continue to place emphasis on admitting students who demonstrate a desire to pursue underserved career paths. What we need help with is capital construction to expand our colleges. We need larger classrooms, larger instructional laboratories, and an expansion of all the student support areas an increased enrollment requires (locker rooms, computer labs etc.). Most US Colleges have major capital expansion projects proposed to their state legislatures. Even if all were fully funded, we cannot expand our enrollments sufficiently to meet the needs of the future.

House Resolution 1232 seeks federal assistance to expand the infrastructure in existing Colleges of Veterinary Medicine so that more students can be trained to enter careers that are vital to our nation's health: animal and human. What we are proposing is a competitive grants program. The grants will be awarded to institutions that are devoted to graduating veterinarians who will enter fields of veterinary medicine that are of vital importance to the health of our animal resources, our environment, and ultimately our citizens. The institutions awarded funds will be expected to document that the enrollment expansion resulted in more graduates entering fields of public health importance. We expect to be held accountable for demonstrating this desired outcome.

I hope we have explained the vital role that veterinarians play in keeping the interface between people and animals a healthy one. Whether that interface is the milk we drink, the eggs and meat we eat, or the birds in our backyard bird feeder, veterinarians play an important role in ensuring that animal diseases are monitored for, detected, and hopefully prevented so they don't threaten the well-being of people. We believe that increasing the number of veterinarians

devoted to this work is vitally important, and that the US government should contribute toward this national priority.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'll be happy to respond to any questions you may have.